

SOLO FLIGHT
(or, SECRETS OF THE FLETCHER MAGIC)

by Ken Hughes

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You can't fly before you can drive.

Not that that was a rule; Kate Fletcher only found it was practical. There was nobody who knew about the magic left to give her rules.

So it was on Kate's sixteenth birthday that she slipped out with her new license and her guardian's car keys, in the utter stillness of two in the morning. She knew she should have waited a few weeks to be *sure* "Aunt" Patricia had let her guard down—and not have to force poor Cindy and Laurel to cut off their tiny party for her. But at least nobody would guess why.

Moonlight washed the clear parking lot of Rosewood City Park with coldness. Kate's hand shivered as she turned the ignition off, and she looked out the window at the familiar grass space ahead. And the chain fence right against the lot, enclosing one small overgrown piece of the land.

The park itself was one place her parents had never taken her flying. It had always been from some far-off field that her father or mother had floated her into the night sky, with one of their hands in her little one holding her over space. But now she was here herself with the old belt under her coat, and the two leather strips in her jogging suit pocket, beside her father's last note about how that same power had destroyed him.

And I don't need the magic anyway. But...

"That's still just fear." She blew out a breath. "All I need are my four steps: stealth, speed, sensing, and practice."

Stealth was done; she'd snuck past Patricia. But that left her a girl sitting in a luxury car in the middle of the night, in plain view in an empty parking lot. Time for the *speed*—Kate opened the door.

The spring night outside felt quieter than being enclosed in the car; even this deep in the city her ears caught only the scattered rumble of late-night drivers disturbing the stillness. Until she turned away from the open field and threw herself at the chain link fence at her elbow.

Every push of her sneakers' toes into the links set the metal clattering... still, the two cars that drove by never slowed. Then she dropped down and pressed into the thicket beyond the fence, and the branches and the rich forest smells swallowed the moonlight.

The first time her feet slipped in the bracken, she pulled out her tiny flashlight. But she kept the light off; whatever else happened, she would *not* be the one to lead anyone else to the magic. Another car rumbled by outside and cut through the rustle of branches on her coat, but she could only feel her way through so fast.

The ground dipped down and she staggered against a tree. Was that the top of the first ridge, or the second—how had anyone ever counted to three ridges and told them from simple dips in the ground, when they were squeezing through the middle of the night? Her steps felt shaky; she'd told Patricia she was too beat from schoolwork to stay up, and that was no lie.

I should be studying all night. The way Miss Trish is “investing” my inheritance, I may not even make it to eighteen before I have to sue. The magic couldn't change that... but it was part of her heritage too.

It was probably the only holding her guardian would never find, the old trust that still owned the park itself—that and the reason for that secrecy. And at least if Kate never found the right spot in the wood, nobody else was going to either.

Then the ground sloped down again, for the third time.

Speed, still on track. But the Sensing part of her plan would take more, from everything her parents had said about the magic. She turned to the side to pick her way along the crest of the ridge, weaving between trees and struggling blindly to keep her feet finding the point where the land began edging down. No time to lose the way and start over.

She almost missed the slow swelling of moonlight ahead of her, until through the trees she glimpsed the south side of the fence and the bright, open park beyond it. *Finally!*

She slipped off her coat and laid it right against the base of the fence, and tucked one of the two leather strips deep inside its pocket; even if she got lost in the darkness she'd only need to follow the fence to the coat. No point losing even one piece of the belt after all these generations.

She turned back into the thicket again, with a smile as she wondered if any of her family had thought of this method of testing the power—or if that had always been why one of them had cut *two* strips from the belt. But her now-bare arms scraped on the branches, and the cold began seeping into her skin.

Still... before she risked the magic, she took out her father's final note. When enough trees lay behind her to hide the light from the open park, she clicked the flashlight on at last. Even though she knew his warning by heart:

Don't trust the words—you have to see deeper to claim what you are.

Don't turn your back on the greedy—they'll never stop wanting what they see.

Don't forget to look down—or look up, when the wind howls or the road is blocked.

Don't forget your friends—but remember that anything I leave you, they can still take for themselves.

But don't trust yourself—your instincts are the first thing you can lose.

And don't trust me, for writing this warning. But Katie, I wish I could let you see it.

“Oh, Dad. Did you really think they wouldn't send it to me, after—”

She let the words die away; mental hospital or not, her father had never stopped caring, even at the end. And even then, both her parents had wanted her to claim this... hadn't they?

Her fingers brushed the old belt at her waist again. Written on its inside would be the words *Made in Sha Ta Ruath*—one more way to keep the secret from being lost, and yet hide it in plain sight. The belt and the strips cut from it, the words, and one place somewhere along

the third ridge in the thicket... however it worked, the family had always known that combination unlocked the magic.

And like the note reminded her, she couldn't trust the words. Not *Sha Ta Ruath*, but: "*Zha-Deruath*," she breathed.

Nothing.

Somewhere beyond the park, a car hummed by. Kate stared around at the dim trees, cold air in her lungs. She couldn't have forgotten the real words...

She shuffled forward another step, two, keeping one foot at the top and the other at the start of the slope down; the right place had to be somewhere along this ridgeline. "*Zha-Deruath. Zha Daruath—*"

The night burst open. Heat flooded up her nerves—light flushed through her eyes so bright she could barely remember it wasn't light but only the sensation, the blessed joy of feeling the magic surge to life again a hundred times greater than it had been with her family now that this time it seared into the belt around her own waist at *her* command—

The magic stopped. Like a furnace of power simply snuffed out, the power vanished and left her shivering in the night with tears wet on her cheeks.

Her mouth opened to say it again—

Kate snapped her jaw shut. *They warned me about that; drawing too much power into the belt is worse than using it too long.* But with the moment passed she clenched her fingers around the belt and still felt *nothing*.

Only a hollowness, in herself. The words *must* have drawn the energy into the belt and the strip from it—but now she couldn't feel it?

Her breath hitched. To have her heritage right at her fingertips and not Sense it, have no way to control it... she'd come for nothing? Months planning every step except whether she even *could*?

"No, no," she sighed, "learning it's just different for everyone." The plan and her coat were waiting; she started back toward the fence again.

The brush and scratch of branches on her fingers teased her, as if they could scratch away even that moment's memory of tingling power. And a wider sound rustled around her; a faint breeze was rising in the night. Kate fought to hold the magic's sensation in her memory, but instead—

Mom, setting her down after a flight, the power pulling out of her again, and the ring of Mom's laugh—

The moment Dad sat her down and first used the word secret—

She wiped another tear away. Magic or not, she'd still be alone tomorrow.

At least she came to the fence right at the coat again. She slid gratefully into its warmth, and dug into its pocket for the second leather scrap. Her other hand weighed the one she'd brought to the magic.

One strip empty, and one charged. Her eyes closed, and she felt for the difference.

All her fingers felt was cool, age-smoothed leather. No tingle of the power she'd bathed in for that fading instant. Out of all the old sensations of riding with Mom or Dad, the one feeling she needed were just gone—

A car rolled by, somewhere beyond the park.

Can't stand here all night. She breathed out slowly and flexed her fingers to loosen them; no point trying to crush secrets out of the leather. No point in worrying, or fearing. Concentrate.

Her right hand prickled. No, somewhere in the back of her head...

She opened her eyes and focused again. Yes, *there*, the feeling that had to match the one strip and the belt around her waist too. Now that she sensed it, it grew clearer, stronger, like a stiffened hand just released from months locked up inside a cast and finally stirring to life.

A moment later she was rattling her way up the fence. She needed Speed more than ever, before she lost the Sense that she had to build on with Practice in the safety of the car—and anything would be faster than stumbling through that thicket. At the fence's top the night breeze touched her face, and then she dropped into the open park.

The fence's corner and the car lay some forty feet ahead in the moonlight. Kate moved at a quick walk, trying not to glance at the trees far across her left where some mugger could still be lurking tonight. That motion was only the wind.

Her next step... *lifted* her.

She felt it, the instant when her foot pushed her forward and the power in the belt stirred; what should have been a simple stride sent her floating and half-drifting forward to come down three paces ahead, and bobbing up again as the next step began.

I'm doing it, this is a real glidestep like Dad's, I can control gravity--

Her body kept rising. Her feet slipped off the retreating ground, she floated weightless and helpless up and felt the breeze begin to catch at her—

She clamped a hand on the chain fence, and the motion stopped. "Planned that one too," she had to laugh. "I'm not just floating away." Pushing up against the fence forced her feet back to the grass—better yet, just making the motion helped her mind find the belt's power again and draw back from how she'd been triggering it. Like a hand that had been set free, but now she had to make the magic *not* stir.

Another step lurched her forward, heavy and normal; then her mind twitched and the next motion carried the start of another bounce. Her fingers scrabbled for the fence again, but she held them back from it, feeling the sweat break out on her face. *Not yet. Control the trigger in my head; I can't be scared.*

Something moved across the field.

Kate's eyes shot toward it, her weight cut away and her body arced forward, the corner of the fence shot past her just as she saw the motion was only branches in the breeze—and that breeze pushed her out into open grass as she kept rising.

"Stop!" She snarled it at herself and her failing control; whatever worked. "I'm not afraid, dammit!" Her will felt for the power and drew back from it, back, *down*.

Feet touched grass. One slow step at a time, she plodded back toward the fence's corner, wrestling to keep her thoughts *off* the magic. Just a dozen good, normal steps to the fence's corner; she could see the car gleaming in the lot behind it, the enclosed safety she'd meant to practice in.

Another step, good. The fence waited ahead, but she edged wide around it, forcing herself to close the last distance through self-control alone. Five steps left to the car, hold it down—

Her knees wobbled. She pushed harder, fighting the impulse even as she felt her body dragging downward in an ache of ankles and a slam of knees and hands to the pavement as gravity tightened to slam her weight down.

No. This time she her lips barely moved, as she forced her balky will back from the magic. Just three more steps to the car...

The car's opposite door swung open.

Kate's eyes couldn't look away. However she'd managed to miss the shape sitting in the front seat, now she couldn't turn her gaze from how *slowly* Patricia Colm stepped out of her car and began walking around to face her. One of her fine-fabric skirts swished with her step, all bought with Kate's money, and without her usual makeup her pale face looked even fiercer in the moonlight.

"This is what you're doing? Some joyride in my car?"

She was rounding the car, about to put herself in front of Kate. Kate gasped out a breath to steady the magic and lunged forward, diving around her and sagging against the metal to clutch the car's mirror. She forced her head up to meet her guardian's gaze.

"Look at you!" Miss Trish said. *"Stumbling and ready to vomit like some common drunk."*

Kate's muscles burned as gravity rippled through her, still refusing to subside. Her heart couldn't seem to slow. At least Patricia could look right at her and miss it all.

Still: *"I'm... not,"* Kate had to gasp.

"More lies. You should be grateful the police spotted the car here as soon as I reported it, before you drove yourself off some bridge and died. You know how hard it is to get a cab this late?"

Kate pushed against the door trying to struggle upright. The car *creaked*.

It didn't creak against her weight—she felt it through her hand, the metal shape shifting on its suspension, ready to rise upward. The whole car.

Heart pounding, Kate fought to pull the magic back. *Am I really going to let a car float away from me... but at least I'd get to see Miss Trish watch it crash...*

"You think you can go behind my back and try to fight my custody, after I took you in, and I've tried and tried—"

Her hand latched onto Kate's shoulder.

"Face it, I'm all you've got—"

Kate's hand moved first, lashing out to close on Patricia's blouse and start to swing her away. With that touch, the image flashed in her head, of how easily a pulse of increased gravity could smash Patricia into a mass of shattered bones on the pavement... instead Kate flipped her weightless form up and over and brought her down against the car.

And the *thud* of her head on metal sounded so *good*—

The creaking stopped. Patricia went limp.

Kate stared, stared, until she saw a twitch of breathing in the woman's side. Only that sight set Kate free to twist away and feel the icy horror flooding through her. One moment, one instant of weakness and she'd done *this*, lashed out and nearly murdered a woman for pushing her too far. *It's got to be the magic—no, I've only started using it, it can't be twisting my head from just one night, this was me—*

A puff of breeze brushed her. From the back of her memory echoed a few words from her father: “The wind always makes a difference, in floating. And the more things I’ve touched, the more I have to track.” She spun around.

Patricia’s still-limp form was drifting into the air.

No time to be scared. Patricia was already clear of the car, and Kate clutched at the magic to lighten herself and leaped for her. For one moment she sailed across the pavement.

But her jump barely lifted her, and Patricia was already rising out of reach.

Kate’s hands flailed uselessly after her, fingers clenching in rage; *I’m still too scared to make a real leap?* She glared at the body, drifting further away in the wind while Kate dropped back to earth.

The first touch of her feet down sent her scrambling over the pavement. She flung the power into her next leap... but it was still too low to reach the shape beyond her.

Instead Kate hung in the air, drifting some ten feet behind Patricia, and it might have been a world apart. *Forget about fear or power, think!* What had her mother said—

Gravity couldn’t be “steered,” so the magic didn’t let them fly freely. Except for what the wind did to them, it let them move only three ways: lift up, drop down, or whichever way they jumped.

And her jumps kept missing. Kate let herself drop again and raced over the park’s grass—she was still too light, she felt the wind pressing at her, ready to sweep her away if she couldn’t keep from floating. Patricia’s shape was already growing smaller in the moonlight.

Kate ran by below her, craning her neck to find a point just ahead of where she would pass. *Don’t fear the magic, don’t hate her...* she leaped straight up.

At first she thought she’d done it, as she soared upward faster than the wind could push her away. But no, as she rose toward her target it still floated beyond her reach, too hard to aim at in the moonlight. Kate let herself fall again.

The shadowed ground rushed up, too fast—she slammed down and toppled on hands and knees with a sickening feeling in her ankle, that left her lying weak on the spring grass.

All I do is miss! She stared up at the shrinking figure... was that thirty, forty, feet up now? Every second put her further out of reach. Soon her “guardian” would be gone, Kate would have her life back...

The next second she was standing. Another moment sent her hopping on her good foot, in floating steps that angled against the wind’s pressure. Before she knew it she was at just the spot upwind of Patricia, rising into the air and reaching out to catch her.

It’s not her fault. That was the thought that floated within Kate as she forced the anger from her grip and steadied her breathing. Patricia could waste their money or save it... and the magic could kill them too, if Kate still couldn’t get control of it. None of it would bring her life and her parents back.

And Miss Trish is not going to die for reminding me. Kate breathed slowly, matching her guardian’s own unconscious breathing, as she eased back the magic and let them settle to the ground.

When they sank onto the grass, Kate shifted her grip ready to lay Patricia down. But at that motion, the older woman stirred.

“What... did I...”

With Kate's arms already around her, it only took a moment to pull her in for a hug. She felt Patricia's heart beating, once, twice—

"You... *hit* me?"

Patricia struggled out of her grip, and Kate let her go. Her guardian shook her head as if to clear it, and each word came faster and harder.

"You can't... wish that away, I must, must have—how'd I get here? Must have a con... concussion. You can't fool me, I need to find a doctor... and a lawyer, change some things, see if anyone ever trusts you again, girl..." She staggered away from Kate, watching her as if she expected another blow any second. "But I never thought you'd just *hit* me. Over a joyride."

Kate watched her sway on her feet, and felt a tiny smile tug at her lips. *Sure, do your worst, at least you're alive.*

But she couldn't resist saying one thing, that had been on her mind since she'd dressed for the night. "It wasn't a joyride."

"What?" Patricia's eyes narrowed.

"I wanted to go for a run." Kate brushed the pants of her jogging suit, and fought to keep the private joke from stretching her smile wider. "All this was over the secret of losing weight."

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